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Interview with Walker Thompson (FA 98)

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BASKETMAKING

Interview with
Walker Thompson
Of Cub Run, KY,
by Lynwood Montell
and Molly Collins.
October 1, 1977

COLLINS: Mr. Thompson, would you like to state your name and when you were born, and where you were born?

THOMPSON: Yes. I was born February 26th, 1896, and I'm 81 years old.

COLLINS: And where were you born?

THOMPSON: Right here on this old farm.

COLLINS: Right here?

THOMPSON: Right here in the old house down yonder. I've lived here all my life.

COLLINS: So you've always lived here in Cub Run?

THOMPSON: Yes.

COLLINS: Do you happen to know how Cub Run got its name?

THOMPSON: No, I don't. It's been Cub Run ever since I can recollect. The post office started there and called it Cub Run.

COLLINS: So you've been making baskets since you were 12 years old?

THOMPSON: I've been working on it since I was 12 years old.

COLLINS: How did you first learn to make baskets?

THOMPSON: Well, my mother. My father and mother were making them, and I went to filling them in with the splits when I was 12 years old. I kept on and the bigger I got, why the more work I did on them. The more work I did on them busting(?) out timber, making ribs, and finally went to framing them.

IIA

COLLINS: So you started out by just helping them?

THOMPSON: Yes. I started out helping them when I started out. After me and my wife were married, why we commenced making baskets over winter time and made them all through the winter. But when summer came, well, I went out working on my farm and made raising corn,

THOMPSON CONT.: tobacco and cane.

COLLINS: Did your parents ever make baskets to...did they do that as their way of making a living, or did they just...

THOMPSON: Oh, no, they did it as a pastime. No, he made his living on the farm.

COLLINS: But they did sell them?

THOMPSON: Oh yes. Yes, they sold them as fast as they made them. Yes, the storekeepers around here gave them 20¢ a piece for them.

COLLINS: Now these were made of white oak, too, and were the same baskets that you make?

THOMPSON: Yes, same basket, only some difference...why I made different sizes. There was a woman over from Florida, the other day, wanted me to make her a basket...a small basket to put flowers in. I'll show you one I've got in here. (Shows small basket.)

Now then, you take them (the baskets), and put artificial flowers, people do, that's what they want with them. They take them and hang them up in the house with artificial flowers in them.

COLLINS: Now what size would that be? Would that be...

THOMPSON: Oh, that'd be about a gallon, or a little over.

COLLINS: Can you make them any smaller than that?

THOMPSON: Oh yes. Yes any size anybody wanted, I could make them.

COLLINS: So could you make even little miniature baskets?

THOMPSON: Oh yes. I can make them that big (bushel), or that small (2-3 inches).

COLLINS: So you have made baskets for people the way they want them? Like when they say...

THOMPSON: Oh yes, yes I made them just the way people wanted them. All my life and off and on, different sizes and different kinds.

COLLINS: Do you ever dye them?

THOMPSON: What?

COLLINS: Do you ever dye them, like make them a different color?

II D
THOMPSON: Oh yes, we used to dye the splits and work a bunch of those dyed splits in with these white ones, and make stripes. Stripes through the basket. I've got a basket down at the old house now. It, well, my mother made it, and it has got dyed splits there around it.

COLLINS: What did you use for the dye?

THOMPSON: Well, just any kind of paint, coloring, any kind of a coloring that you could color with.

COLLINS: Did you ever use berries or walnut shells?

THOMPSON: No, never used anything like that. No.

IV A
COLLINS: What about, I've often wondered, all of the baskets I've seen have this little protruding area right here (under the rim of the basket). Is there any specific reason for that style? Is that...see ~~the~~ from the side... see how... you call these the ribs, right? It seems like these ribs come out further than the other ones to make the design of the basket.

THOMPSON: Well, you mean come together?

COLLINS: No, I mean...what am I trying to say?

MONTELL: It sort of pooches out here more.

COLLINS: Yes, it puffs out, kind of like a little chipmonk's mouth or something.

II A
THOMPSON: Yes, you make the ribs the same length. That's what makes that do that. See you commence here with the ribs the same length. Anytime...it like puffs out. That's why you can't make ribs different lengths. If you do, your basket, well when you're planning on filling it up, well it wouldn't hold anything in it then, you see. It would roll out. But when you've got those sides in it, it holds anything you put in there.

IV C
Now I'll tell you about a little basket I made. A man here in Louisville said he'd be back down after it one day this week. He'll put artificial flowers in it and hang it up in the house. And he said these baskets here were antique, and those artificial flowers in it...that he wouldn't trade anything in the world for it.

MONTELL: What do you call that basket? That is, what's it used for?

THOMPSON: To put flowers in.

IVC
MONTELL: No, originally what would it have been used for?

THOMPSON: Oh, for gathering eggs out of the hen house.

MONTELL: That's what I figured. An egg basket.

THOMPSON: Yes, an egg basket. Take it out to the hen house and put eggs in it.

COLLINS: What were the larger, like the bushel baskets used for?

THOMPSON: Oh, you can make them any size you want. You can make a bushel or a bushel and a half. Or any size basket that you want. A bushel basket is about as big as anybody would want it, because if you make them any bigger, you couldn't fill them up with anything... you couldn't cart it.

IVC
COLLINS: What did you use a bushel basket for?

THOMPSON: Back then, when we used them then, we used them for feed baskets for corn. We had cows and things like that to feed... We'd feed cattle with them in the barn.

IVC
MONTELL: Did you ever hear of a shuck basket? When you would pick the corn while you shucked it, would you put the shucks in a basket? Would you do that or not?

THOMPSON: No, no. We'd always throw our shucks on the ground.

IVC
COLLINS: What about a peck basket? What would that be used for?

THOMPSON: Well, a peck basket, you could use it for different things...anything they'd need it for, they'd put it to use.

COLLINS: Did people ever use a basket to take their lunch to school?

THOMPSON: Yes, kids used to, way back then. They used baskets like this to take their lunch to school. Yes, we took our lunches to school lots of times, in a basket, when I was little.

MONTELL: They wouldn't be that big, though, would they?

THOMPSON: No...yes, they'd be about that size. You'd put three or four (lunches) in it.

MONTELL: What would they take for lunch mostly?

THOMPSON: Well, they'd have fried eggs...and I don't know... biscuits...they had a little something of every-thing.

MONTELL: You know when I was growing up we had this one family

MONTELL CONT.: and they were very poor, and all they would bring would be a half gallon of molasses mixed with butter, and some cold biscuits. About six of those kids ate molasses and biscuits and butter everyday for lunch.

THOMPSON: We lived right down here when we went to school. I had to walk through hills and hollows about three miles to the schoolhouse. I had to walk...it was the only way to go.

II C COLLINS: Mr. Thompson, how do you make the baskets, how do you start from the very beginning?

THOMPSON: Oh, I make the hoops first. Then when you get your hoops made, you make your ribs. Then you have your splits made, then we take the....here with your splits and you just wrap around here. Then you take a... I'll show you what I sue for the ribs.

II B Now that's what is called a basket awl. See, when you get that made, you take your basket awl and wrap this around, then you put your ribs in.

MONTELL: What's that made out of?

THOMPSON: Wood with a nail in it.

MONTELL: What do you do? Just drive the nail in and then file the head off?

THOMPSON: Yes.

MONTELL: It looks like it would split that out. What kind of timber is that?

THOMPSON: That's poplar.

MONTELL: And you call it a basket awl?

II C THOMPSON: That's a basket awl. See you put this in where the ribs go and push them in. Then I go on this side and do the same thing over there.

MONTELL: How do you keep the ribs from falling out?

THOMPSON: You poke them in there, they won't come out. When you get that done, you commence to working splits around them.

MONTELL: How long would that basket last, if you were still using it to gather eggs in everyday?

THOMPSON: Oh, it would last for years. I've got a basket, I'll show you, that my mother made. And she made it, I

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THOMPSON: guess it's 30-40 years old. It's a bushel basket.

IIA
MONTELL: Were you a better basket maker than your mother or vice versa?

THOMPSON: Well, I made them as good as she did. Yes, I could make them as good as she could do it. We'd make them for different things and make them different ways. She took the one that she made down to the peddler's (?) house, and she worked more splits around on the ribs... on the side here, and on the hoop.

IIA
COLLINS: How do you know what type of wood to use? How do you know when the wood is ready, when you're going out to get wood to make a basket?

THOMPSON: You go and cut your timber.

COLLINS: Can you go any time of year?

THOMPSON: Any time of the year.

COLLINS: Does the tree have to be a certain age?

THOMPSON: No, cut them from that size, to on up to that big (five inch diameter). Make hoops and baskets. Take the big ones and they'll make better hoops...make the wider hoops. Of course you can take the smaller ones and make narrower hoops for the small baskets.

COLLINS: Who gets your wood for you?

THOMPSON: Oh, I get it myself.

COLLINS: And you always have?

THOMPSON: Yes.

MONTELL: Well, he's only 81!

COLLINS: Do you get it right on your farm here?

II E
THOMPSON: Yes. We go down and get it on the farm. We don't have any wood on this place now, though, and I have to go to my neighbor's over here, with my son-in-law. I went over and got some of it. And I don't know....
back in Grayson county, said he had lots of wood and that I could have all I wanted.

COLLINS: Would it be easy to teach somebody how to make a basket?

THOMPSON: Oh, it would be no trouble to show them, but you would have to get everything ready.

IIA
COLLINS: Who, would you say, is the best basket maker you know?

THOMPSON: Who's the best? Well, I don't know. Me and my mother, we made them about the same.

COLLINS: If you saw a basket some place, and they put one of yours next to it, would you be able to tell which one was yours?

THOMPSON: Oh yes. Yes, I'd tell my basket.

COLLINS: How could you tell?

THOMPSON: The way the ribs were put in, and the way the hoops were wrapped. Now there aren't very many of them that wrap hoops like I do. When you wrap your hoops, you cross the splits on the outside and inside. They're crossed on both sides. Most of the people when they're wrapping them, will just cross them on the outside, and not on the inside. That's the way you can tell the difference.

COLLINS: Is there any particular reason you do that? Does that make it a sturdier basket?

THOMPSON: When you wrap it that way, it makes your hoops tighter together, and when you punch your ribs in...that makes it better.

COLLINS: Could you tell me about the tools you use? Awls, froes, etc,

THOMPSON: I use the froe and the pocket knife to cut my ribs and hoops, and smooth them out.

COLLINS: That's what you use to smooth them?

THOMPSON: Yes, I use my pocket knife for making splits, ribs and hoops.

COLLINS: Do you moisten or wet your wood before you start making your baskets?

THOMPSON: No. I take them and I roll them all out. I take my hoops and ribs and roll them all out, and then I go to work on them. If you don't care, I'll ~~go~~ run down and get that old basket. Then I'll tell you about it.
(He gets the basket his mother made.)

MONTELL: Is that the one your mother made?

THOMPSON: Yes. This is what is called a fancy basket. See the splits, how narrow she made them?

MONTELL: Why would you make some baskets fancy and some not fancy?

THOMPSON: Well, she just made this for keepsake. She made this just to keep. She was living with me when she died and I kept this ~~one~~ one.

Now here are the splits I made from that timber outside, that I showed you. This is what I make the splits out of.

COLLINS: Would those splits make a bushel basket?

THOMPSON: Oh yes. You can take these home with you, if you want to.

COLLINS: And you don't need to moisten those to work with them at all?

THOMPSON: No.

COLLINS: Some people who talked to us, said that they moistened the wood before they used it.

THOMPSON: Oh, yes, some people wet theirs before they use it. My mother, she always wrapped them the way I did. She crossed them on the inside and the outside. When you cross them that way, it holds the hoops tight together, and makes a better basket.

COLLINS: Do you know who taught your mother how to make baskets?

THOMPSON: No, I don't. She was making them before I was big enough to know how she learned it.

COLLINS: Does everybody around here make this type of basket, or were there different variations?

THOMPSON: People make different baskets--different shaped baskets.

COLLINS: Did you ever make anything like a willow basket?

THOMPSON: No, the only kind I ever made was a bushel basket like that, and like the other ones down here. Those were the only kind I ever made. Of course, I could have made other kinds, if I wanted to, but I didn't want to fool with it. Most of what people wanted were baskets like these.

COLLINS: You were out to please your customer?

THOMPSON: Yes.

MONTELL: Where did your mother grow up?

THOMPSON: Right here in this country. Yes, she was born and raised here.

MONTELL: What do you call this country? What's the name of it?

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THOMPSON: Some people call it Cub Run precinct, and some call it Wax. Wax is but two miles down the river. Wax and Cub Run. This is Hart County.

MONTELL: Would you say, "I'm from Cub Run", if they asked you?

THOMPSON: Oh, yes.

MONTELL: Cub Run?

THOMPSON: Yes, I'd say Cub Run, because that's where I get my mail.

III B
COLLINS: Do you know anything about the people who used to transport baskets to other states?

THOMPSON: Yes, merchants in this country used to do that.

COLLINS: Did you know any merchants?

IC
THOMPSON: Oh, yes I knew them. There was old man Jim Lawlor.

COLLINS: Is he still alive?

THOMPSON: No, he's been dead a long while. There was old man Dick Bradley, around Dog Creek; he bought baskets. He had a store right here in the country, and he bought them and shipped them out to another country. Of course, they wouldn't tell us what they wouldn't tell us what they would get for them.

III A 1
III A 3
MONTELL: Would they pay you in cash or in goods?

THOMPSON: Well, if I went to the store (to sell them) and I didn't want anything (at the store), they'd pay me in cash.

MONTELL: And they in turn, how did they get their money back from some place else? Did they get paid in cash or in goods? The ones they sold the basket to--how did they get their money out of them?

THOMPSON: I don't know. They shipped them out. They got the money. I don't know how much they got for them. They shipped them out to some company.

III B 3
MONTELL: How did they ship them?

THOMPSON: On the train. They'd take them up to the train in Munfordsville...they'd take them up in a wagon. They'd take the baskets, put them on the train, and ship them on out.

MONTELL: They never did ship them out in a wagon, a covered wagon, even a long time ago, before your time even?

III B3

THOMPSON: No, no. They hauled them in a wagon. They had no way else to take them there, because they didn't have cars in those days.

MONTELL: But they hauled them in a wagon to Munfordsville?

THOMPSON: Yes, and they put bushel baskets like that. One on this side, one on this side, and one on the top. Then they'd tie them together. That made four in a bundle. That made it handy.

COLLINS: How many baskets would somebody make to sell at one time?

II B C

THOMPSON: Oh, that would be hard to do. You take a weeks time.... how many baskets different people can make. Oh my mother, now, she could make 20-30 a week. My dad, he'd cut out the hoops and ribs for her, shaved the hoops. He had an old round knob (?) he shaved the hoops with back in those days. But now we don't have them now because the old fashioned log barns are gone. You put a prank up in that log barn and you hoop with the door knob (?). But now there aren't any log barns or door knobs (?), and I shave them with my pocket knife.

MONTELL: What was your mother's name?

IC

THOMPSON: Virginia Thompson. She was a Dennison.

MONTELL: Dennison?

THOMPSON: A Dennis.

MONTELL: Dennis?

THOMPSON: Yes, then she married a Thompson.

MONTELL: And then was your daddy also from this country?

THOMPSON: Oh, yes. HE WAS BORN AND RAISED RIGHT OVER HERE. The old house is torn down, but the father and mother are buried....on the hill.

MONTELL: But he wasn't a basketmaker himself?

II C

THOMPSON: No, he'd make hoops and ribs and chop the timber for her. He'd work on the ribs, he liked that you know, but when it came to filling them in, he wouldn't fill them in. I had a twin brother and he worked on them too, just like I did. He's the only one, there were six boys, and he and I are the only two that are living now. All the rest of them are dead and gone. My youngest brother died, he was eight years younger than I was, and he's gone.

COLLINS: Your brothers and sisters made baskets?

THOMPSON: Yes.

COLLINS: Were they different than your baskets?

THOMPSON: Well, they weren't as good.

COLLINS: Even your twin brother?

THOMPSON: No, he never would fool with them much. No, he didn't work on baskets very much. Once in awhile he'd make a few, but hardly ever. He just didn't like to fool with them. Of course I'd always work on them in the winter time.

MONTELL: Are the baskets you make now as good as the ones you made when you were much younger?

THOMPSON: Oh, when I first started out they weren't as good as these, but the more I made, the better I got.

MONTELL: So the ones you make now are just as good as the ones you ever made?

THOMPSON: Oh, yes.

MONTELL: You don't get rusty on basketmaking?

THOMPSON: No, the baskets I make now are as good as I ever made. Well they're about as good as anybody can make them here in the country. There isn't anybody who can make them as good as myself. A lot of people make them, but they're no better. They're just baskets.

COLLINS: Does it do anything to your hands, working with that wood all of these years?

THOMPSON: No, I didn't hurt my hands any. I got used to it. It toughened them. After you got used to working with them, your hands get tough and you never pay any attention to them. I never did.

COLLINS: Why do you make them? Just because you like to?

THOMPSON: Well, back in those days, like I said, you couldn't.... you raised tobacco back in those days. I did. I shipped 1800 pounds of tobacco one time to Louisville. I got back \$18.00 for that whole 1800 pounds of tobacco-- a whole summers work. A neighbor of mine, he had 1000 pounds, he shipped it out to Louisville and they wrote him back. They wanted him to pay for the shipping expenses.

MONTELL: Isn't that awful?

THOMPSON: He didn't even answer the letter. Because if they pay expenses, they can just take it and go on it. I'm not paying any expenses on it....Now that's how crops were back in those days. Of course we made baskets. I'll tell you what we did, my wife and I. We'd make enough baskets through the winter time to buy sugar, flour,....and everything. We didn't have to buy a thing. I never did starve in my life. I always made baskets in the winter time to live through the summer. Then I worked my crops in the summer time. That's the way I planned it.

COLLINS: Would you say that the whole community ~~depended~~ on basketmaking for money?
depended

THOMPSON: No, a few families did, but not very many of them. No, there weren't very many families that made baskets.

COLLINS: Well, how did other people feel about you making baskets?

THOMPSON: They learned one to another. When a man wanted to learn how to make them, he'd come watch. How he made them, trimmed them all out. He'd go home and try to make a basket. But ther wern't too many families that worked on them.

MONTELL: Did they respect you all or did they look down on you?

THOMPSON: The ones who made baskets?

MONTELL: No, the neighbors around you, the ones who didn't make baskets. Did they respect you for making them or look down on you?

THOMPSON: Oh, no, it tickled them. They'd come in and watch and kid us to death. They'd say, "I wish I could make a basket like that." They appreciated people who made baskets. Now it's all antique stuff, because nobody is making them now. Just one once in a while making them. There are the Childress boys back over there. He makes them once in a while. He doesn't make very many.

MONTELL: Is that Cleevy?

THOMPSON: Yes. Cleevy Childress.

COLLINS: Do you have any stories about basketmaking?

THOMPSON: No I reckon not. Just working, making baskets, and getting them all together, putting them together. That's all there is to it.

MONTELL: When you think back on your childhood and making baskets, and all with your mother, does it bring back pleasant memories or sad memories?

THOMPSON: No, she just made them and sold them, and it was a pastime. She didn't have to make them. But they just made them for a pastime. She made them like we did, in the winter time for a pastime, you know.

MONTELL: That's not always true, though. Didn't some families make them because they really had to have the money?

THOMPSON: No, well, in a way...we had to have stuff from the store, and we made baskets in the winter time to buy all that stuff from the store...to keep from going in debt. When we sold the tobacco crop, what money we got up, we kept it, or we would have been in debt. I never went in debt to a store in my life.

There was a man by the name of Bradley down here. Dick Bradley. I went down one day, and o f course I wasn't making....

SIDE TWO

THOMPSON:I guess that was true, because the ones he gave credit never paid, you know. When he died he had loaned a lot of money. People had debts they owed him and they never paid him.

MONTELL: Now the baskets that you all made when you were smaller, they were made because you knew that people wanted them or needed them around the house?

THOMPSON: Well, a lot of people around the country, they didn't make them. They'd come and buy them for feed baskets.

MONTELL: Did they all serve a function, though, no just to hang flowers in...?

THOMPSON: Oh, no. They took them and used them for everything. They'd dig potatoes, and pick them and put them in a bushel basket, then pack them into the house. They used a bushel basket for everything.

MONTELL: Now, if "Mr. X" came here to buy a basket from you or your mother, and he picked it up and looked at it, what would he be looking for? Flaws in it? The good looks of it, or what?

THOMPSON: He would just look at it and see how it was made and what it is made out of, and how long it will last.

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THOMPSON CONT.: Of course my mother would tell him, if you kept it dry, it will last for years. If you left it out in the weather and let it rain on it and get wer, why it would soon rot the botton.

MONTELL: Did he buy it because it was pretty, or because it was well made?

THOMPSON: No, he bought it because he used it. He wanted to use it at home. For around home--feeding, digging potatoes, put roasting ears in....They used them for everything. They are handy. They do have a place on the farm, they are handy, you can use them for many different things.

IV C

How you must have heard people say
sometime in your lifetime, 'roughly
how old is the craft of basket-making?
In this country when did it start?

Thompson: Well, it started back when my mother
was making them, before I was even
born, and it had been around for
years - that they'd been making baskets
in this country. Because, see, I made
the and I've been making
them for a long time. And my mother -
she made them back before I was
born.

McIntell: What family names do you normally
associate with making baskets?

Thompson: My family.
McIntell: Is that different families made
them?

Thompson: Well, around this country there
were wasn't hardly anything but
a bunch of Thompsons that used
have that about all that made
baskets. My dad, my uncle - I
had five uncles - and they all
worked on baskets - their families.
McIntell: Oh really?

Montell: I was talking about your dad's side? But he didn't make them himself, but his brothers did.

Thompson: Yes, his brothers helped work on them just like my dad did. Cut out the timber, get the timber up, make the hoops and the ribs.

And then the womenfolk would frame them up, put the ribs in and frame them up, and get them ready to fill out. Now they'd fill them out, they'd have to get them framed - they'd work them out to about here and get them ~~they'd~~ let the boys would go ahead and fill them out, then were them in the hoops.

Montell: I didn't know there was a sort of a division of labor that way. I thought one person made them from start to finish.

Thompson: Oh, yes. The Thompsons just made them and the store people were the ones that made them in this country. There were also the Albies.

Thompson: Oh, yes. The Thompsons just made them and the store people were

III #3

They people in the country, what
didn't make them, they'd come and
buy them from me. Then they'd
take them to the store and ship
them out. They'd give them to
good price, I don't know what
they'd never tell us what they
were getting for them, because they
were scared we'd raise our price
on them.

IC
Mentell: Let's go back now. Let's try to name some
of the family names - the last names -
the Thompsons and the Williams -
what other families made baskets?

Thompson: Well, the Thompsons, they made
some.

Mentell: Bogsdans?

Thompson: No. No Bogsdans around here
Mentell: They come from south.

Thompson: Yes, further south and in Dawson
County.

Mentell: Childresses?

Thompson: Yes, the Childresses. I's, they made
baskets.

Mentell: Who else? Can you think of any more?

Well, that's about all in this country

at that time - the Thompsons and the Childress well of course other peddlers had back down there on the river - the Johnsons - but they never loaded with baskets.

They never made them, they would just come and buy them. And the waddles that used to live on Dog Creek made baskets. The batthers (?) made them. They all used to be neighbors down there.

Collins: Is there anybody who knew that makes them today?

Thompson: Nobody. Only Cleary Childress. He's

the only one I know that makes baskets now. He only makes them in the winter time and looks on his crop in the summer time. I make even paddles when around. He goes to Mammoth Cave. He gets a big price for them. Some will not that they sell for - \$350 a piece down there.

Montell: Oh, really?

Thompson: Yes. There's a man from Bowling

17
Thompson: Green that comes in and gives
VIII D ~~me~~ \$20.00 a piece for the basket
baskets and \$15.00 for one of
the smaller ones. I made him
a bunch.

Montell: Was there a time when nobody
VIII C made baskets at all through here?
That is within the recent years?

Thompson: Well, not in my remembrance.
Because they were making them
when I was born.

Montell: I had in mind maybe the 1940's
or the 1950's - did it slow ~~down~~
down then?

Thompson: Oh, they slowed down. Not hardly
anybody making them now. No,
everybody has quit. They haven't
made them here for 10 to 12,
maybe 15 years. Only Cleo
Childress, he makes them over
here. He works on the farm, he
makes baskets and takes them
and peddles them out - gets a
good price out of them. There
isn't anybody else who makes them.
There have been 2 or 3 coming here
wanting to learn how to make
baskets. I said, "Come over ~~one~~ some-
day and I'll show you how."

Collins: How many baskets would you say you've
made in your lifetime?

Thompson: Oh, I don't know. There have been lots
of them - I couldn't have any idea at all.
I've made so many.